

What do family wineries actually say about themselves on their websites?

South African wineries build authentic brands around familiness, heritage and the family name

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A family business's website is often the first handshake with a customer, and for a family winery it carries extra weight. The label on the bottle makes a promise — heritage, care, a name the family has staked on the wine for years — and the website is where that promise gets spelled out. Adele Berndt and Corné Meintjes read what South African family wineries actually write about themselves online, then mapped how the pieces of their family identity fit together.

The timing matters. Branding research in family firms is still young, and work on family wine businesses is scarcer still. Wine is a crowded market, and a family name can be a genuine asset in that fight — but only when the business knows what it is communicating and does so coherently. This study is one of the first to approach the question from the family's own side: not what customers perceive, but what families choose to project.

WHAT WE STUDIED

The authors analysed the websites of 113 family-owned wineries in South Africa's Western Cape, the heart of the country's wine industry. They did not survey owners or run interviews. Instead they read what the wineries chose to publish about themselves — the "About us", "Our Story" and "Who we are" pages. Starting from a list of 125 family-owned cellars, they kept the 113 sites that carried these self-description sections.

Context gives the sample its weight. South Africa is the world's eighth-largest wine producer, the sector supports hundreds of thousands of jobs, and family businesses are the dominant ownership form in the

economy. The Western Cape, where almost all of these wineries sit, is the natural place to read how family wine brands present themselves.

Text was pulled into Atlas.ti and coded using an adapted Gioia methodology — a structured, two-stage approach that moves from the wineries' own words up to broader theoretical themes. Two independent coders worked through every site. The analysis drew on three established ideas from corporate branding: corporate identity (what the organisation is), corporate personality (its human character and culture), and corporate expression (how it communicates and relates to stakeholders). Berndt and Meintjes reframed these for the family context as family identity, family personality and family expression, with familiness — the distinctive bundle of resources a family brings to its business — at the centre.

One detail helps in reading the findings. The study reports "groundedness" scores, which are simply how often a theme appeared across the sites. They are counts rather than statistics, but they show clearly what wineries emphasise and what they leave out.

KEY INSIGHTS

Family identity does the heavy lifting

Family identity was by far the most prominent element online, with a groundedness score of 173 — well ahead of the other two components. Wineries led with legacy, the single most common code in the whole study, appearing 134 times. Family history, ownership and the family name followed close behind, and 42 of the 113 wineries, just over a third, put the word "family" directly in the winery name. Mission and vision statements, philosophy and stated values reinforced all

of this. Interestingly, wineries referred to their philosophy more often than to formal mission and vision statements, suggesting these brands prefer to express a way of working over a strategic declaration. Older estates leaned hard on continuity – Boplaas tracing its farming back to 1880, Altydgedacht describing six generations of custodianship, Neethlingshof spanning three centuries.

The practical point: on a family winery's website, the family name is what converts into a brand. Wineries that bury the family story behind tasting notes and product specifications are leaving their strongest differentiator unused.

Quality is the proof, awards are the receipts

Competence showed up almost as strongly as identity. Quality was mentioned 151 times across the sites and awards 66 times. The two were tightly linked to legacy: the family stakes its name, and the quality of the wine is offered as evidence that the name can be trusted. One shift is worth noting. The awards wineries chose to feature most prominently were increasingly for environmental and social achievement, not only for what is in the glass – a sign of where these brands believe reputation is now won.

Personality is the missing piece

This is the most interesting gap in the data. Family personality – the warmth, the passion, the character of the people behind the label – was the least developed of the three elements. Passion appeared 50 times, "modern or contemporary" 46 times, and a stated love of the craft 36 times; culture codes such as ethics and integrity were thinner again. Only about a third of wineries described themselves in these human terms at all.

This is the most underused opportunity in the study.

Identity and expression were communicated reasonably well, yet personality – arguably the most relatable thing a family has, and the hardest for a competitor to copy – was left vague on most sites.

Sustainability has become the brand promise

On the expression side, sustainability emerged as a dominant theme, and it was bound tightly to the wineries' family philosophy rather than bolted on as a separate cause. Climate (63), soil (69), conservation (50) and sustainability (37) ran through the brand promises, alongside concrete stakeholder commitments: care for employees and their children, training and education, and community programmes. Some made the commitment tangible, channelling a share of every bottle sold into a fund run by farm employees. Customers and employees were the two groups wineries wrote about most.

The estate is also a destination

Many wineries positioned themselves as places to visit, not only labels to buy. Accommodation was mentioned 132 times, restaurants 80 times and wine tasting 36 times, with weddings, conferences and architecture rounding out the offer. For a family winery, the website sells an experience that wraps the wine in hospitality – and that experience is itself part of how the family expresses who it is.

Heritage is harder to claim than it looks

A quieter finding carries real weight for younger firms. Sixty-seven of the wineries, 53.6%, were established after 1990. South Africa's are largely "New World" wineries, without centuries of unbroken family ownership to point to. That limits how far they can lean on deep history, and pushes them to build authenticity through philosophy, values and visible care rather than age alone.

TAKEAWAYS FOR FAMILY BUSINESS LEADERS

The framework Berndt and Meintjes propose is practical rather than purely theoretical. Familiness sits at the core, and three elements radiate from it – identity, personality and expression – all carried to stakeholders through the brand promise on the website. When the three are aligned, the family brand reads as authentic. When they drift apart, the authors warn of "identity disorientation": a brand that says one thing, behaves like another, and ends up feeling inauthentic. For a business trading on its family name, that is a costly failure, because the name raises expectations rather than lowering them.

A few things follow for any family firm thinking about how it presents itself online:

- The family name is an asset, but it is also a promise. Putting it front and centre raises the bar for everything else on the site.
- Heritage is not the only route to authenticity. Younger family firms can earn credibility through clearly stated values, philosophy and care for people.
- Personality is the cheapest differentiator most firms are ignoring. Customers attribute human qualities to family brands, so give them something human to attach to.

IMPACT

For owners and the advisors who work with them, the study reframes the website from a brochure into an identity instrument. It is where a family decides what to say, how much to say and who says it – and where the abstract idea of familiness either becomes tangible or stays as marketing filler. The research also answers a

long-standing call in the field to examine the channels families use to convey their identity, and it does so from the sender's perspective.

The logic travels well beyond wine. Any family business carrying the family name – a bakery, a law firm, a manufacturer – faces the same alignment problem and the same opportunity. The mechanics differ; the underlying task does not. What the study deliberately leaves open is the visual and social dimension: Berndt and Meintjes read text only, and only on websites. How families express identity through images, video and social platforms is the obvious next question, and in a category as visual as wine, a pressing one.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Audit your "About" and "Our Story" pages against your actual family story. Make sure legacy,

ownership and the family name are present and coherent, not scattered or merely implied.

2. Make the family personality explicit. Name the values, the passions and the character of the people behind the business rather than assuming customers will infer them.
3. Treat sustainability and stakeholder care as part of the brand promise, connected to the family's philosophy, rather than parking them on a separate page.
4. Align identity, personality and expression before adding more content. Inconsistency reads as inauthenticity, and the family name amplifies the cost.
5. Extend the same discipline to social media and visual content, where younger family firms can build the authenticity that age alone would otherwise supply.

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